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ABSTRACT

Approximately 25 percent of the U.S. population is in rural areas and about 10 million students are enrolled in rural schools, comprising 12,000 of the 15,000 schools in the country. Although rural communities and their schools are quite diverse, certain characteristic economic, cultural, and social factors create large numbers of "at-risk" individuals. Barriers to effective programs and services for rural at-risk learners include: (1) lack of exposure to occupational diversity, limiting the career development process; (2) family opposition to moving away, limiting job opportunities; (3) economic barriers to comprehensive career preparation curricula; (4) geographic isolation; (5) high unemployment; (6) lack of adult service providers, making transition difficult; (7) transportation problems; and (8) shortage of qualified staff. On the other hand, rural communities have a number of service-delivery advantages related to school-community intimacy. Vocational programming for rural at-risk students can be improved through recommended strategies for coordinated career development practices, vocational assessment that takes advantage of all available personnel and resources, provision of support services, and provision of programming to facilitate school-to-work transition. The quality of vocational preparation and transition services for at-risk students depends upon the following critical components: curriculum content; instructional delivery; support services; administrative policies; intra- and interagency collaboration; labor market projections; skill acquisition and evaluation; and follow-up activities. (SV)

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Concepts & Issues

Meeting the Needs of At-Risk Learners in Rural Areas: Challenge for the 1990's

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A growing problem is mounting in American rural public education (Veir, 1990):

- Approximately 10 million students are enrolled in rural schools, comprising 12,000 of the 15,000 schools in the country.
- The poverty rates of rural areas exceed those in urban sectors.
- Approximately 15 million disabled individuals, many of school age, reside in rural areas and could benefit from vocational education programming that would assist them in developing salable skills for competitive employment.
- Low educational attainment, high rates of functional illiteracy, and increasing dropout statistics place many learners in rural areas at risk of not becoming a contributing member of society.
- A growing number of language minority and multicultural students are isolated in rural communities and quite often left without the resources needed to ensure success in school or employment.
- Each year, it is estimated that one-half million people leave rural areas to seek employment and new hope in urban areas.

Rural School Definition

Although numerous definitions are used to describe rural schools, the National Rural Research Project defines rural schools as those which are located in a district where

> the number of inhabitants is fewer than 150 per square mile or when located in counties with 60% or more of the population living in communities no larger than 5,000 inhabitants.

When using this definition, in excess of two-thirds of the school districts in this country fall into the rural category (Sarkees & Veir, 1988).

Diversity of Rural Communities and Schools

The diversity of rural communities and their schools is described by Helge (1984) as follows:

> They range geographically from remote islands and deserts to clustered communities, and economically from stable classic farm communities to depressed socio-economic settings and high-growth "boom or bust" communities. The array of rural schools ranges from isolated schools serving as few as 1 to 10 children in a location 350 miles from the nearest school district, to schools located in small clustered towns or surrounded by other districts. (p. 294)

High Numbers of At-Risk in Rural Areas

Approximately 25% of the nation's population live in rural areas. An estimated 8 million individuals living in rural areas are between 15 and 24 years old (William T. Grant Foundation, 1988). Characteristic economic, cultural and social factors (e.g., low tax base, high poverty rates, high unemployment, variation of rural subcultures, and transient students and personnel populations) create large numbers of individuals who would be classified as "at risk" (Neubert & Leconte, 1990).

Barriers to Effective Programs and Services for At-Risk

Heady and Porter (1981) identified several barriers that exist in working with at-risk learners in rural areas:

- The career development process, a key component in successful programming for at-risk individuals, is crucial. However, students in rural areas are not usually exposed to a great variety of occupational choices. This lack of exposure can affect the development of their career paths because it creates a limited frame of reference on which to base a career choice.
- Family influence is often strongly against students moving away from home after graduation or completion of specific job training. Indi-

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viduals are frequently encouraged to stay in the immediate community, which could limit available job possibilities. Research has shown that parents are the single most important influence in the career-planning and decision-making process of their children (Drier, 1977).

- Economics dictate that it is more difficult in rural areas to provide a comprehensive career preparation curricula with related facilities, staff, and resources. There is frequently a limited number of vocational program options.
- Geographic isolation will often limit the job market that is available, as well as the diversity of jobs. Frequently, students are faced with the prospect of taking a job that they have little interest in if they choose not to relocate.
- Unemployment among the 18 to 21 age group in rural areas continues to be a major human resource problem.
- A lack of agencies and adult service providers, as well as a lack of coordination among those services available, makes transition in rural areas difficult.
- Transportation problems are common in rural areas. Individuals often have difficulties getting to and from work or accessing available transitional services.
- Recruitment and retention of qualified staff is a problem in many rural areas. Thus, when the issue of adequately serving the needs of at-risk learners is raised, the crucial need for personnel preparation, inservice training, and coordinated services cannot be overstated.

Advantages of Rural Communities Toward Effective Vocational Programs and Services

There are a number of advantages of rural communities which should be recognized and utilized to the greatest advantage possible in planning programs and services for at-risk students (Sarkees & Veir, 1988, p. 25):

1. Many students grow up in close-knit homes where family involvement in school activities is strong. Parents usually exert considerable control over their children's education and take an active role in the decision-making process.
2. Teachers know students very well and usually provide them with a great deal of individual assistance.
3. Students are often active participants in their own educational process.
4. Community involvement in school activities is very active, and innovative solutions for problems are usually generated and utilized.

Issues in Providing Vocational Programming to Rural, At-Risk Students

Vocational programming for at-risk students presents a challenge to many rural school districts. There are no easy answers or solutions. It will take a long-range coordinated effort on the part of both the school system and the community.

Career Development

Significant contributions are made to the development of an individual's career by the influence of family, friends, peers, and community. Individuals in a rural setting are especially at risk because of the lack of worker role models and career development opportunities available. A smooth transition from school to work or further education is not likely unless effective career development practices and curricula are present (Humes & Hohenshil, 1985).

Suggested strategies include:

- The career development process should be designed as a coordinated effort among the school, home, and community. This can capitalize on the close-knit ties that are often found in rural communities where families are a focal point and community involvement in the educational process is high.
- Students should be exposed to as wide a variety of occupational areas as possible. This can be accomplished in a number of ways. Student exchanges can be organized with other communities to expose students to career options which may not be available in their home community.
- Students should be surveyed to determine the extent of interest in careers in which the school is not currently providing vocational preparation. Mentoring relationships can be established with workers in the community who can teach a trade or specified group of skills to a student on a one-to-one basis. Flexible scheduling with the school must be a component of this training program.

Vocational Assessment

Vocational assessment is a key component in effective programming for at-risk students. It should be a multidisciplinary process used to enhance the career development and decision-making skills of learners as they move from middle school to high school, enter vocational education programs, participate in work experiences, and transfer into the labor market. Team members can include vocational special needs coordinators, vocational evaluators, counselors, vocational instructors, support personnel, and paraprofessionals (Neubert & Leconte, 1990). In rural areas, it is particularly important that cooperative linkages be utilized in developing and implementing a process that will meet the needs of at-risk students while taking into consideration the limited personnel, resources, and funds that are available. Vocational assessment results must be clearly interpreted, shared, and translated into appropriate placement and curriculum modification decisions.

Suggested strategies include:

- Consider assessment activities which are the most practical for the resources available in the school and the district. Often an informal approach is best. A Level I service approach is the least intensive approach and serves as a screening process to identify the vocational preferences of students by reviewing existing information, interviewing students, utilizing informal exploration activities, adminis-

tering interest tests, and touring vocational programs. A Level II approach builds on a Level I foundation by conducting psychometric testing, simulated work activities, and vocational counseling to develop a more comprehensive pupil profile (Neubert & Leconte, 1990).

- Involve existing personnel in developing a curriculum-based vocational assessment (CBVA) approach which focuses on available vocational programs and job opportunities in assessing the curriculum needs of an individual student. The use of training modules can help to prepare existing personnel in the following phases of CBVA: (a) establishing a curriculum-based vocational assessment process, (b) understanding curriculum-based vocational assessment purposes and characteristics, (c) placing students in vocational education programs, (d) planning students' vocational education programs, (e) monitoring student progress, (f) planning transitional services, and (g) evaluating the process (Albright & Cobb, 1988).
- Utilize locally developed and validated work samples representing tasks from available vocational programs and/or jobs in the community labor market. Representatives from local jobs can become involved in the validation process and provide valuable input into the school-based assessment and placement process.
- Some rural systems which are unable to afford certified vocational assessment professionals hire educators trained in vocational assessment through state-supported training programs or institutes (Neubert & Leconte, 1990).
- Utilize mobile vocational assessment teams to travel within a district or among a number of coordinating districts within a geographic area. These teams can operate within existing vocational laboratories using work samples, inventories, interviews, situational assessment, or commercial instruments.

Support Services

Support services are crucial to at-risk learners in order for them to succeed in developing and utilizing their vocational potential. Sarkees and Scott (1985) identify five categories of support services: (a) auxiliary services (e.g., housing, health services, child care, transportation); (b) outreach services (e.g., public relations, recruitment services); (c) instructional support services (e.g., basic skills assistance, job readiness training, work experience); (d) guidance services (e.g., counseling, career development); and (e) placement services (e.g., interview skills, resume preparation, employability skills, follow-up services).

Most support personnel provide a variety of services for at-risk students such as (Sarkees & West, 1990, pp. 7-8):

- assisting vocational teachers in adapting curriculum materials
- providing direct instruction to students in classroom and laboratory activities
- assessing student acquisition of skills
- evaluating student performance
- facilitating support services listed on IEPs/IVEPs/ITPs
- seeking/developing job placement opportunities in the community
- counseling students in career planning
- networking with community agencies and adult service providers
- evaluating the effectiveness of programs.

Suggested strategies for providing needed support services include:

- The support services necessary to help at-risk students succeed in rural schools are often not provided due to inadequate funding. One solution that many districts are using is to form multidistrict cooperative services to share programs, resources, and personnel (Parrish & Lynch, 1990).
- Integrate vocational and academic curricula to the greatest extent possible with a special emphasis on the development of basic skills, employability skills, and generalizable skills.
- Peer tutoring and mentoring programs can be established to assist at-risk learners in schools, especially when there is a lack of paraprofessionals, counselors, or support staff. Integrating functional curriculum skills into existing instructional activities can assist at-risk students in developing useful transition skills while participating in regular academic and vocational classes.
- Support personnel should network to provide information about continuing educational and training opportunities to encourage at-risk learners to further develop their skills after leaving the secondary school environment.

Transition

The transition of at-risk learners from school to post-school experiences has become a strong federal, state, and local issue during the past decade. One of the most important adjustments in life is the movement from the secondary school environment to the labor market or a post-secondary setting. This passage can be difficult for most at-risk students, but it is particularly challenging for those who reside in rural areas. The necessity for transition programs and resources is acute in isolated rural communities and must be addressed. The successful transition from school to work is the ultimate indicator of effective programming and support services.

Suggested strategies for facilitating transition include:

- Career development activities should be incorporated into an Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) that begins in the early grades and follows the student through middle school and high school.
- Information about post-secondary opportunities should be collected and presented to students and parents, including community/junior colleges, colleges/universities, technical schools, area vocational schools, and proprietary schools.

Field trips can be arranged. Guest speakers from these institutions can be invited to the schools. Seminars can be arranged where students and parents can attend together.

- Workshops for local education, business and industry representatives should be conducted to discuss the issue of transition, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the school and community in coordinating transitional services for at-risk students. Action planning teams should be formed. Available services and resources should be discussed, as well as barriers that exist at the local level and possible ways to overcome these service gaps or obstacles.
- Generalizable skills (e.g., reading, mathematics, oral and written communications, interpersonal relations, and critical thinking skills) should be emphasized in all classes taught in the local school system in order to prepare at-risk students for transferability of labor market competencies from one occupation to another, as well as one geographic area to another in the future.
- At-risk students should be actively recruited into the vocational student organizations (VSOs) affiliated with the local vocational program offerings. Participation in VSO activities can assist these learners in developing the essential work habits, leadership skills, social interaction skills, and problem-solving skills, which will enhance successful transition to the community and labor market.

Conclusion

Planning vocational programming for at-risk individuals requires careful analysis and utilization of existing personnel, facilities, and resources. Sarkees and West (1990) have identified the following components which are critical to program planning: (a) curriculum content, (b) instructional delivery, (c) support services, (d) administrative policies, (e) intra and interagency collaboration, (f) labor market projections, (g) skill acquisition and evaluation, and (h) follow-up activities.

The combination of these components will dictate the quality of vocational preparation and transition services for at-risk students. The refinement of these components in rural areas will dictate creativity and cooperation among educators, administrators, instructors, support personnel, paraprofessionals, agency personnel, employers, parents, and students.

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